CHAPTER III

VOICES IN THE CITY

- A QUEST FOR IDENTITY
Anita Desai's second novel *Voices in the City* deals with the problem of alienation from a different perspective. Because of their physical involvement in the life of the city, the main characters in the novel become alien to the life and relations on the emotional, intellectual and spiritual grounds. A sense of disappointment and loneliness develops in them, with the result they feel alienated. Here alienation is not only between husband and wife but also between the artist and his art, the individual and the city, the son and the mother. The novel is "a tragic exploration of personal suffering."\(^2\)

The novel is divided into four parts which deal with all the major characters of the novel - Nirode, Monisha, Amla and the Mother. The first part of the novel is devoted to Nirode, the main protagonist. He is a typical Bengali youth and nurses 'a cynical grouse' against the world. He is an introvert and wants to live in 'shadows, silence and stillness.' He is 'a rootless nihilist, a psychic outlaw.' As his basic needs have been frustrated, he alienates himself from his essential nature. His value system is damaged. He accepts neurotic values and develops neurotic wants which are destructive both for self and for others. Nirode, is a non-entity, courts anonymity, consistently fails or even seeks failure. His alienation stems from his disgust with the society which he finds to be morally corrupt and spiritually dead. 'Voice', the title of the magazine Nirode edits, is suggestive of the lone voice of sanity amidst the din of the babbled voices in the city. He pines for a life of solitude. Life for him is unfair. The tumult of Calcutta brings about in him a dissociation of sensibility. His identity is deeply disturbed by the tumult of the city. He speaks with "conceit and malice, disregards his companions with fine philosophic detachment and then frantically craves for their company again unable to feel the inexorable influence the city exercises on him, he vacillates physically."\(^2\)
Every menacing pulsation of the city is both a symbol and a reality. Nirode belongs to neither. As he puts it, it is an escape from nowhere to nowhere. He wants to escape from the sights, sounds and smells of the city. Images of ignoble, mean sordidness and spiritual disintegration focus on the psychic tensions of his 'disgruntled and distraught self'. He wants to possess the city "I will have it, you will see how I get it."³

Some critics find in Nirode a character, deeply influenced by Camus, Kafka, Boudlaire and tend to see him as a figure who has walked out of the pages of one of Camus' novels. Nirode has been depicted as quoting this famous statement of Albert Camus: 'In default of inexhaustible happiness, eternal suffering at least would give us a destiny. But we do not have even that consolation and worst agonies come to an end one day.'(p.40). It is pointed out that Nirode's experiments with failure are an indication of a 'quest for an abiding meaning in life'. He achieves nothing in the end and remains a rootless drifter who can neither compromise with the world nor reject it as absurd like Camus' Meursault. He cannot become a torch bearer of a true revolutionary spirit.

As Usha Bande has rightly observed, "Some other critics have studied Nirode's Hamletian disgust and Lawrentian Oedipus complex. It is arguable that his difficulties do not arise out of sexual urges in the Freudian sense. In Horneyan terms, Nirode does not strive for freedom in the manner of a healthy individual but tries to adopt the strategy of withdrawal so as to escape conflicts."⁴ As the novelist tells us, 'the habit of withdrawal had become too strong' in Nirode, and he 'grew more and more weary of contact... The intricacies of relationship - approach, recompense, obligation - these aroused in him violent distaste and kept him hovering on the fringe of the world' (P.62).
A deeper probing into the working of his mind will show the psychological causes behind the dislocation of his psyche. Nirode, the ‘congenital failure’ goes astray while searching for his glorified self. If Aunt Lila finds him ‘a disgusting Bohemian’, Monisha thinks of him lovingly as ‘a broken bird in the aviary’. These images do not redeem the personality of a man suffering under the conflicting demands of his psyche. References to his childhood reveal that the personal prejudices of his parents against each other, open hostility and contempt affect and damage the tender psyche of the children. It is quite clear when Amla describes how her father treated her mother: ‘I remember mother crying... and noise - I cannot remember why, but it had something to do with what he said, or did... and we trailed behind him, feeling horribly depressed’ (p.207). The personal prejudices - ‘terrible contempt and resentment’ in mother’s eyes, the ‘malice and spite’ in father’s smile seep into their young lives. They fail to grow as ‘self-directed’ individuals. The worst sufferer is Nirode, the eldest. Another cause of Nirode’s frustration and alienation is his father’s sense of pride in Arun, his brother. Parents should not praise the bright child in the presence of the less gifted one. The partiality bias on the part of the parents, creates indifference between the brothers. Even Amla, the youngest of them all, notices her father’s bias and later tells Dharma that her father was ‘imperiously unfair’ to Nirode. Such immature attitude of the parents, frustrate the basic needs of the growing child, who craves appreciation from his elders. As Bernard Paris rightly says, "frustration of these needs so alienates the individual from his essential nature and so disturbs the course of his development that he is no longer aware of his best interests or ability to pursue them." The feelings of envy and hate for Arun lead Nirode to despair. He sees Arun’s future as an undimming brightness and cries out: ‘Unfair, life is unfair’ (p.207).
His father 'betrayed' Nirode and his mother 'disillusioned' him. After his father's death he feels cheated and humiliated when his mother openly prefers Major Chaddha's company and neglects him. "After his father's death, he wishes to be the husband - substitute for his mother, but as he suspects her amorous overtures towards Major Chaddha, he grows envious of his rival in love and wholly alienates himself from his mother. The mother-son and son-lover identity of Nirode disintegrates," as Swain and Nayak point out. The trauma of having lost the affection of his mother tortures Nirode within. It erects 'between him and his mother's brilliant territory... a barbed-wire fence all glittering and vicious' (P.10). He despises his mother and calls her 'she-cannibal', the cobra who had swallowed his father. Nirode's emotional strength resides in his mother as his mental agony is the result of the unrealised 'Oedipal complex' in him. Jasbir Jain aptly points out, "The Nirode-mother relationship appears to be drawn on the lines of Hamlet's relationship with his mother." Nirode is thus alienated from his mother.

Nirode is a complex personality. His consecutive failures reflect his false self-image. He is confused and unsure. 'I don't know why I ever got involved in anything... I want to lash out my one now... whether I sink or swim' (p.94). He develops his own value system and wanders in search of possibilities that could provide him with a sense of identity, which he had lost during his journey from childhood to adulthood. The desire to preserve his idealised image torments him and does not allow him to succeed in his ventures. He says, happiness, suffering -he wants to be done with them, disregard them, see beyond them to the very end.

Like Camus' 'Meursault in The Outsider Nirode has no set of moral or spiritual values. His shifting over from one project to another, like starting a magazine and writing a play shows that he hated being responsible for anything at all. He asserts his absolute freedom in an existential manner when he says 'one must be king kite wheeling
so far away in the blazing empty sky as to be merely a dot almost invisible urchins who stood below stones in their fists ready to be aimed and flung’ (P.72).

Nirode rebels against all forms of authority and establishments. He cannot work with others. So he leaves his job with the Patrika and does not realise the humiliation of borrowing money from his friends. Borrowing is something less embarrassing than working with any man by his orders, at a given time, at a meaningless job. So he loathes ‘those automatons’ at the top. ‘I loath their superciliousness, their arrogance, their blindness.’ (p.18). His idea of starting his magazine, voice, and work freely at his own command satisfies his sense of independent identity. Nirode may claim that the most important force in his philosophy of life is the desire to be a true individual, wholly independent from outside influences both mental and physical. Unfortunately the desired freedom still eludes him because the success of the magazine depends on communication, contact and competitiveness - all of which he abhors. His new venture of writing a play also fails.

When his friend David reminds Nirode of the success of the next issue of his magazine, ‘Voice’, it only elicits a negative reply from him, ‘of course it is. I want it to fail quickly. Then I want to see if I have the spirit to start moving again, towards my next failure. I want to move from failure to failure step by step to rock bottom.’ (p.40). Nirode does not find any interest and meaning in any sort of job and it indicates that he is overpowered by alienation. It is due to alienation that he tells his friend that it is better, ‘to leap out of the window and end it all instead of smearing this useless sticky glue of senselessness over the world. Better not to live.’ (p.18). The choice of Nirode is between being successful and getting lost or pursuing failure in a bid to assert his self
or identity. With the mundane, materialistic and degenerating society, Nirode is on the run. His alienation stems from his disgust with the society which he finds to be 'morally corrupt and spiritually dead'. "Nirode shares with the Beat Hero, his sensitivity, his concern at the decadence and degeneration of moral values, his disgust at social corruption, debasement of human sensibility, his search for identity, anxiety about the integrity of his self, the rejection of the society and his desire for the loneliness, his efforts to preserve his individuality and seek freedom from circumscribing constraints" as Subhash Chdnara observes.

Nirode wants to escape from this dirty and ugly world as he is confronted with life, surrounded by the city. He does not like to be goaded or prodded by his friends and relations for doing something with the world of reality which only contributes to his unhappiness. He is alienated from his friends and his near and dear ones. He acknowledges that a writer is vainer than a painter and a sculptor. But 'writers were always a vain bunch from Kalidas downwards.' (p.130) For him the artistic work too must be anonymous as the Ajanta murals or the temples of Konark and Khajuraho. Nirode's distrust of the people and the world becomes one of the reasons for his hatred of the magazine as it attracted people he would not have liked them to see anywhere except at their funerals. This perhaps may imply indirectly his mother.

As Nirode does not have any definite goals in life, he does not work towards success. "He was wearied by his own unsureness in which he swept back and forth like a long weed undulating under water... and his life consisted of one rejection following another’ (pp.63-64). Amla his younger sister also very poetically describes his detachment from the world that makes him lie like a drifter in Calcutta. He drifts in the city just like "a part of the crusted flotsam on its crest, allowing it to carry him in
perfect indifference and without any certitude of destiny moving only because it continued. One day it would break on the shore and with it, he would sink quickly silently into the sand." (p. 185-186). As he is alienated he remains a ‘rootless misfit’, although endowed with remarkable talents. He either capitalises his talents by compromising with the world, nor becomes a true revolutionary. He remains a ‘luke warm revolutionary’, ‘a psychic rebel’. Nirode is probably looking "for a Buddha like solution, beyond suffering and happiness or echoing Lord Krishna’s message to Arjuna of performing duties relinquishing attachment and being indifferent to success and failure".9

He makes a creed of failure. He becomes "erratic, starting one ambitious scheme after another only to abandon them, or he may give up the struggle to a large extent withdrawing."10 This is part of his rejection of social norms of success. He wants to be independent and chooses isolation as his lot. He reacts violently to criticism and takes neurotic pride in being a ‘congenital failure’, Certainly, Nirode wants to live without success and sorrow and he feels that it is "... a greater victory because it brings you, in the end, silence and solitude and those are the two most powerful things of all (p.185). He also intends to be detached from all things.

Nirode’s wish to begin the journey without a ticket and unpacked suitcase is just a desire to escape. With the whistle of the train or hooter of the ship he hears the call ‘escape, escape’. But for him there is no goal to reach to. He is fast heading towards alienation. He is proved an unsuccessful man in life and so he wants to go somewhere. But he is not able to reach the point where he can understand the true meaning of life. His struggle is to hold on to his identity. He "idealises himself in two images. First one is that he wants to be an independent person free of familial, social and emotional ties. Second one is that he wishes to be a hero who would rise in spite of his failures."11 His
ardent desire is to fail at everything. It is a negative attitude towards life. In his idealised self-image he becomes a hero, a modern Sisyphus, rolling the boulder uphill. His scorn of success is partly a negation of a world wherein he feels isolated.

Nirode is an ‘unshelled snail’. His sensitiveness makes him conscious of his self-respect. His self-respect breeds self-reliance. It ultimately makes him independent of the world and its people. He knows that he is a man ‘for whom aloneness alone was the sole natural condition and the treasure worth treasuring.’ It makes him feel at times like ‘a leper diseased with the loneliest disease of all.’ His individuality keeps him from being patronized by Jit or Sony or from opening an account in the bank with his mother’s money. If he accepts their aid he may be acknowledging them. If he succeeds in life he may be just another individual - one of the multitudes. He is unhappy and alienated with friends too as they force upon him a career: a way of life, some high ideals. The antagonism of this ‘misfit hero’ this ‘rootless nihilist’ and ‘psychic outlaw’ extends even to his family and he refuses to be caught and branded ‘with the family name, family money, family honour’ (p.156). He transforms his rebellion against family and society into virtues and ‘he succeeds in creating for himself a personality - an invulnerable individual, a self-righteous and angry prince, who throws away a huge property for his principles,’¹² as said by Usha Bande.

Nirode has no sense of the real self. He loses contact with reality. All his efforts are diverted towards preserving his identity. In his character a powerful dramatisation of human isolation is seen. It is certain that one can retain one’s society, by being secretive, losing all communication. Nirode creates for himself dead silence. It is not a
sign of normal withdrawal but a neurotic compulsion. Jiddu Krishna Murthy also observes that silence is not absence of noise. It is a higher virtue receiving the sound foundation of love. "If you have not laid the foundation, which is love, which is virtue, which is goodness, which is beauty, which is real compassion in depth of your silence, is only the ending of noise," as pointed out by J. Krishnamurthi.

Nirode is jealous not only of Arun his own brother but of all those who follow a routine. The thought of being one with the office-going crowd repels him. 'Revulsion filled him, so huge a distaste and horror filled him that he felt empowered by it as Arun, who did not know it, would never be empowered .... to fly, through an immensity of air above Arun in his crawling train above the painted ship on the sluggish river intoxicatingly light and free and powerful' (p.10)

Nirode's rebellion is completed through Monisha's death. The fire which burns her to death acts like a cathartic agent where Nirode is concerned. When he sees her dead body, his silence is broken and his exile is ended. Her death drove his anger, resentment and unconventionality out of him. He brings her dead body from her husband's home. He washes himself clean of hatred and anger towards his mother and prepares to offer her, love and sympathy.

Monisha's suicide brings a sea change in Nirode. Her death makes him understand the real meaning of life. His search in life is over and he says, 'I know why I am living, at least, I know now where I am going - towards her, towards her. She is waiting can't you see.' (p.257). This state of Nirode's mind and heart indicates the fathomless alienation in his life. He discovers his vulnerability. In the intensity of his
suffering he realises that he is not a stoic beyond pain or pleasure. He also feels that he has not done away with family ties and deeper feelings. He is touched by personal grief. So far he has been successful in self-deceit, considering himself immune from "the torment of conscience, that dragged, dull sleep in which he had rocked obviously for so many years........scornful of his success, stagnant and dehydrated of all ambition, communion, relationship, joy and responsibility." (p.250) During this period of family tragedy, the foundation of his false-self is shaken, affording him a glimpse of his inner self. He awakens to the necessity of exploring within himself the essential experience of love and affection. A communion of consciousness with others can now have a constructive effect on him.

Horney observes that real suffering has a therapeutic effect on the individual. It has the power "to broaden and deepen our range of feeling and to open our hearts for the suffering of others." For a while Nirode experiences a communication with his real self in the hour of agony. He regains his human capacity to sympathise with Amla and aunt Lila in their suffering. In their moments of interpersonal sympathy and tenderness, he reaches out to them, shares their feelings and is filled with tenderness for the world. He is 'filled with an immense care of the world that made him reach out again and again to touch Amla’s cold hand... He pressed them to him with hunger and joy, as if he has rejoiced in this sensation of touching other’s flesh, other’s pain, longed to make them mingle with his own, which till now had been agonisingly neglected." (p.248).

Now Nirode turns into a reflective person and diverts the energies of his self to enlarge its perceptiveness. This is an elevating experience for him. He can see the whole pattern of life and death, "the whole fantastic design of life and death, of incarnation
followed by reincarnation, of unconsciousness turning into consciousness, of sleep followed by waking' (p.249).

Unfortunately, this experience does not liberate Nirode. He cannot integrate the fragments of his inner and outer worlds to give a meaning to his existence. Conflicting forces work on his psyche triggering off the process of deterioration. Rejection by his doting mother deals a severe blow to Nirode's pride. Self-contempt and self-hate grip him. Their mother accepts Monisha's death stoically. Nirode sees his alienated relationship with his mother having frightening killing force which is gradually pushing him towards death. She has achieved what Nirode has failed to achieve. He hates his mother for it and then directs this despise towards himself. Severe self-hate leads to self-destructive tendencies. The emergence of Kali in his psyche is symbolic of the deteriorating process. Kali represents the dark half of female's totality. She is destructive as well as creative. She is the mother goddess of Bengal in particular and of India in general.

Nirode's chaotic state of mind indicates the terror of death. He tells Amla that he has been sentenced to death. 'I am prepared and waiting for it. I have heard her approach - death, Kali... while she watches I grow more and more vividly alive by the minute and also closer and closer to my death' (p.256). Nirode recognises the duality; knowledge and ignorance, reality and illusion, good and evil, life and death. He struggles between his two selves - real and idealised. He loses emotional and psychological poise when the real self is overpowered by devitalising forces. It is his psychological alienation.

Nirode has lost confidence in the noble conception of woman. Culturally, his mother's behaviour vitiates his moral and social standards. Womanhood in India is
deified, particularly motherhood. Swami Vivekananda views woman as mother. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan observes that the Hindu view of woman is an exalted one. With such a sublime picture of motherhood as backdrop, Nirode cannot digest the loose conduct of his mother. It arouses severe repugnance in him and heightens his alienation. Devoid of her reassuring and confirming touch, he experiences extreme loneliness and separation. He feels an outcaste in the world where he was already feeling unwanted. When his mother rejects him finally, the fear of losing her affection forever horrifies him. In the intensity of his grief and the alienation of his situation, he considers his father’s death and Monisha’s death a foreboding of an impending disaster for him. He loses faith in love, life and turns hysterical. ‘Amla, I know now, she is Kali the goddess and the demon are one’ (p.263).

A psychological evaluation of Nirode’s character scores the fact that he is a representative of his sickness of contemporary existence. In fact, Nirode is a social and psychological portrait of one of the most common effects of anxiety neurosis. It is felt that he is trapped in an existential predicament and there is no rational solution to his problems. His mother’s rejection in the end only serves to heighten his neurotic anxiety and speed up his self-alienation.

In part II of the novel Anita Desai presents a touching account of the shattered life of Monisha, the married sister of Nirode. Her married life is marked ‘only by loneliness’ and ‘incommunication’. The insufferable, cacophony sound of overcrowded apathetic Calcutta, Monisha’s claustrophobia and oppressive lack of privacy, her incapacity to bear a child, her total incommunication with her non-challenge husband, the absence of love in her life and the resultant tormenting loneliness within and the
suspicion of her in-laws who look on her as a thief - all these terribly torture her mentally and make her self-alienated. Like Maya of *Cry, the Peacock*, Monisha too is estranged from her husband, but her estrangement is constitutional and temperamental rather than 'socio-psychic' and "the city is a symbol of the dichotomy of existence. She fails to choose between death and drab-life. To live or not to live is her dilemma. She has no faith in life and no alternative to her relevant life."¹⁵ Her inability to bear children further adds to her misery. These socio-psychological reasons torment her so much that alienation and frustration become her lot. She finds herself "trapped in an emotionally, bankrupt and joyless matrimonial bond with all outlets of escape plugged for her,"¹⁶ as observed by Solanki. Monisha is ‘beautiful’, ‘polished’, ‘balanced’ and ‘contained’ - ‘like a well-cut jewel’. She is a silent and stubborn girl. Jiban leads a life in his enclosure excluding Monisha from it. She is to alien herself with the kitchen, the vegetables and look after numerous children in the family. If Jiban is uninvolved and unresponsive so is Monisha. She has no desire to swoon on him and ask for sympathy and love. Her senses make her quick reading of her life around her place and position respond with increasing agony but her mouth is sealed as "Life without emotion, without passion is merely another form of death,"¹⁷ as observed by Keniston. Monisha’s relationship with Jiban lacks pure love. He is very self-centred and does not understand the feelings of his wife. Hardly a conversation takes place between them and there is emotional distance from each other inspite of their physical proximity. All the time she suffers from an oppressive sense of loneliness. Her pathetic condition is that Jiban remains sitting with them but he is never with them at all. Her matrimonial relationship is absolutely dissatisfying as Jiban shows scant concern and respect for her. For him, she
is an outsider in the family. Even after his marriage he feels more attached to his mother. So Monisha is in search of identity and some meaning in life.

Monisha is compelled to feel helplessly like one trapped in the house of her in-laws as she finds herself exposed all the time "to their scrutiny". There is no privacy in her own room. Her sisters-in-law flock in her room, laugh at her books and discuss her ovaries and blocked tubes. Her place in the joint family becomes one of disrespect, little regard and humiliation.

Monisha is made to live in a barred enclosure shut away from life, activity and privacy to the extent that she is not allowed to speak to her own brother and sister. Erich Fromm in his popular book, The Art of Loving says about circumstantial loneliness "...the awareness of his aloneness and separateness of his helplessness before the forces of nature (family) and of society, all this makes his separate, disunited existence an unbearable prison." Monisha's mother-in-law and the husband act as perpetual body-guards. She withdraws from the material concerns of the family and retreats behind the barred windows. She advises Amla to go always in the opposite direction. It is an advice to rebel. Amla notices her stillness and death like submission and thinks of her as a statue. But her stillness is not steadiness or detachment. It is not even feeling or suffering. It is death like stillness.

Monisha's fear of touch and intimacy, her withdrawal from passion and its display confine her to her own private prison. She is aware of this, "I am different from them all. They put me in a steel-container, a thick glass-cubicle and I have lived in it all my life without a touch of love or hate or warmth on me. I am locked apart from all
of them, they cannot touch me. I have not given birth, I have not attained death’ (p.239-240).

Monisha is not like any other Bengali woman. She is an intellectual, cast among Phillistines. Her wardrobe stocked with Kafka, Dostoevsky, Hopkins and French and Sanskrit works, amuses the ladies of the household. With their ‘indoor minds starless, darkless’, they talk about their dowries, saris and jewellery, babies and blocked fallopian tubes.

Monisha’s predicament becomes miserable because she is childless. She wants to have some sense of belonging. Her desire to have a child works in her unconscious. Seeing a Kangaroo lying in the Sun she thinks; "A Kangaroo lies on its back to sun, the soft honey fur on its belly, but its pouch alas, is empty” (p.119). It is true that traditional Indian society looks down upon a childless woman. A woman gains status only as a mother. Her alienation from the family, society and an inner urge for existential freedom lead her to reject her mean existence and ‘such a life cannot be lived, a life dedicated to nothing - that this husk is a protection from death. And yes, yes then it is a choice between death and mean existence and that surely is not a difficult choice’ (p.122). A loveless relationship with Jiban and others in the family and absence of any creative activity reduce her to a pathetic state where life becomes ‘only a Conundrum’ that she broods over forever ‘with passion and pain, never to arrive at a solution only conundrum’.

Monisha’s participation with the social milieu is only on the physical plane. Mainly she remains mentally aloof in her actions and interactions with the surroundings. Her conscience withers and wilts. The dichotomy of her existence is seen and she is turned into a woman who keeps a diary. Her diary is an evocative of the shifting
atmosphere around her. Her arrival from Kalimpong to dusty crowded Calcutta into the folds of this amoeba like family of Jiban, is not at all convenient, comfortable and acceptable to her.

Socially, the joint family, with so many traditional bindings, is impossible to live with. Even Nikhil, Monisha’s nephew, is exasperated by this ‘bad system’ as he terms it. It is so detrimental to individual growth and freedom. But, psychologically, it is more of a shattering experience for Monisha than it socially is. She gets the first blow at the reception, arranged by the heads of this many headed-family. She is made to touch the feet of a large number of aunts and uncles. Later on life is reduced to cooking and washing which hurts her pride further. ‘To sort out the husk from the rice, to wash and iron and to talk and sleep, when this is not what one believes in...’ Life with her large secure, round keepers roofs her in yet amidst many members of a large joint family she is made to live lonely. She is reduced to peeping out of the barred windows to catch a glimpse of stars. She yearns for the free air of Kalimpong of Darjeeling. Her self-alienation makes her become nostalgic with ‘The solitude of the jungles there, the aqueous shadows of the bamboo groves and the earth laid with great fallen leaves.’ Solitude, silence, privacy, space and time for meditation all these are her friends, and are lost to her in Calcutta. Now she loves loneliness.

Although Monisha is branded as a thief for touching her husband’s money without his permission, she silently suffers the humiliation. She almost pleads ‘let me be weak’. She has no desire to be courageous to fight back, knowing that it is of no use. Her plea against Nirode’s desperate defiance explains her own attitude to life. ‘Accept. I plead with him accept defeat, accept insignificance. accept solitude, a truer gift than
any communication, any art, any faith or delusion the world can offer you. If he accepts, he will survive' (p.128). She herself has been able to survive because she would accept defeat, insignificance, and solitude.

Parental indifference and familial disorder characterise Monisha’s childhood. The remoteness of home puzzles her. There is an element of the unknown in the atmosphere. As a result she withdraws into a world of her own, remains aloof and retains it in her relationship later. She glorifies herself as a lonely and cold person - almost a stoic. All the female members of her husband’s family and also other Bengali women are the targets of her contempt. She broods over their lot, waiting on men, self-centered and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood always behind bars, those terrifying black bars that shut them in, in the old houses, in the old city.

The Bhagwad Gita is an ideal book for her. Non-attachment of the Gita is a healthy attribute. It does not advocate running away from the field of action. Monisha, just like her brother, Nirode, remains uninvolved. She is afraid of involvement and she lived her life ‘without a touch of love, or hate or warmth’. In fact she is afraid of love. For "love is like running bare foot on broken pieces of glass and one is likely to be wounded and hurt". The retreat into the self weakens Monisha’s involvement in the living world. Her silent advice to her brother is to ‘Cast away involvement...and be totally empty, totally alone.’ This unvoiced pleading is more for herself than for Nirode. Ihab Hassan finds out in his brilliant discussion of modern self in recoil, that the cult of inactivity involves the "alienation of the moral and artistic imagination from things of this world often leading to a criminal state of autonomy." Monisha’s failure to attain
poise and maintain equilibrium leads her to alienation. By negating healthy aspirations, Monisha has lost the will to accept the challenges of life. So she says, ‘Allow us just this to stand back apart’, in the shadows and watch the fire and flames, the sacrifices that are flung into it.........and permit us - not to take part’. Here she speaks for both Nirode and herself. For both of them touch and communication imply humiliation. She wishes to stay alone and work alone : ‘Alone I would work better and I should feel more whole.’

Desai employs the metaphor of the city to convey two selves of Monisha. Calcutta has two faces: one spacious, the other weary. Likewise Monisha has two selves - ‘one glorified’ the other ‘actual’. When charged with theft her glorified self suffers. Her image receives a shattering blow. Under the pressure of accusation her glorified self-image crumbles down. Jiban’s words ‘why did not you tell me before you took it? cut her even deeper. She is badly hurt by the indifferent behaviour of her husband. The charge of theft serves as a fictional device and disturbs her status quo position. "As in the game of snakes and ladders from a high position of protective social place of a wife........, Monisha falls down to reach the rock bottom in her husband’s family whence she has to pick herself up unsupported by her husband and has to struggle to attain her individual status,"° as rightly said by Indira Bhatt. It shows the loveless relationship between the wife and husband. She decides to choose solitude and withdrawal and rejects her husband and in-laws. She wants to discard others and enjoy her aloofness. She never considers Jiban as hers. After the charge of theft, aloofness suits her. She willingly accepts to live there ‘a little beyond and below everyone else in exile’. The urge to hide is ingrained in her. Locked in her room, she reads books and feels self-
Important. At night she creeps up to the topmost floor and enjoys a communion with vast dark emptiness. She undergoes a tremendous amount of psychological tussel and "The struggle within her is the struggle between her self identity and the other identity, existence and non-existence. Her quest for identity stems from her failure to comprehend the essence of existence. Alienation is a necessity to her." say Prof. Swain and Nayak.

Only a brief moment of self-discovery enables Monisha to know her real-self in the brilliant blackeyes of the street dancer. Her self-hate is symbolised by the personification of the dancer-woman as Kali representing destructive forces. She opts for a violent end to establish her triumph over her in-law's by defeating their attempts to subjugate her. This is a neurotic way to feel great and free. It denotes an unconscious impulse to frustrate, outwit or defeat others in personal relations.

Finally she realises that the drama of life has gone by. Neither birth nor death has touched and there is complete alienation. She says; 'I am locked apart from them. They cannot touch me... I have never touched anyone never left the imprint of my fingers on any one's shoulders or tongue on any one's damp palate... This life enclosed in a locked container merely as an observer and so imperfect. So handicapped an observer at that' (pp.239-240). Completely alienated, she sets herself ablaze and dies before help could reach her. As Erich Fromm says "The (this) desire for interpersonal fusion is the most powerful striving in man. It is the most fundamental passion, it is the force which keeps the human race together, the clan, the family, society. The failure to acquire it means insecurity or destruction - self destruction or destruction of others." Monisha needs love and a sense of belonging, and she is searching for this but she is unable to understand the real aim of her quest because of her intense alienation caused
by despair and mental agony. In the end, her quest for peace and love lasts with her death due to all-pervasive alienation. "Monisha can be regarded as a victim of Hindu familial ideology and patriarchal oppression. Her unfulfilled sexuality, her metaphorically and literally barren marriage, her lack of privacy, her waiting upon men, her material dependence despite her education, and her violent death are all marks of her sexual colonisation," says Sachdeva.

Part-III of the novel mainly deals with Amla, the unmarried sister of Nirode and Monisha. After completing her studies in an art school in Bombay she comes to Calcutta to work as a commercial artist in a private firm. She is marvellous with her beauty and absolutely free and bright in the centre of the exciting world. Unlike Monisha and Nirode, she does not want to stand 'back apart, alone in the shadows'. She wants to enjoy life to the full. She wants to enjoy herself in the company of her brother and sister. But she finds them trapped in the net of despair and anxiety. They are completely alienated from the world outside and are shrinking fast into a shell of their own. The fate of her brother and sister shocks her. She wants them to involve in life, and eliminate their loss of love for life. She tries to rescue them from the harms of alienation, invain. Her job also does not give her happiness and satisfaction. She is an extrovert. She desires for sublimation of her inner thoughts and feeling in the form of artistic expressions. She does not like to keep herself away from social interaction.

Amla starts enjoying life in the clubs and restaurants by dancing and drinking with different important men. She prefers a life in which fulfilling emotional ties impart meaning and value to human existence. Unfortunately nothing has happened according to her expectations. Since her arrival in Calcutta, her job does not give her the desired happiness and satisfaction. On seeing the miserable condition of her brother and sister.
she realises that 'the city of yours, it conspires against all who wish to enjoy it.' She remonstrates that 'this monster city... had captured and enchanted... both her brother and sister'. The city of Calcutta is presented as a very powerful character. It affects the respective moods and attitudes of Nirode and Monisha and Amla. It is "a villain against whom they seem to fight, in addition to their fight against themselves." In the beginning she was quite confident that she could enjoy herself in the city. So she tells Aunt Lila "Calcutta doesn't oppress me in the least......it excites me." But later she feels sorry for coming to Calcutta. Her frustrating experience makes her exclaim, 'why did I come to Calcutta? Why did not I stay away in Bombay? Or go to Kalimpong.' "The metropolis becomes a symbol of .... alienation, futility and meaninglessness of existence and promotes a tragic view of life." The feeling of alienation now shifts from her family life to her public life. She feels that she is also enmeshed in the same dilemma in which both her brother and sister have already been trapped.

Despite Amla's straightforwardness and zeal for life, the destructiveness and violence are noticed. It is shocked to see that Amla also shares some abnormalities with Monisha and Nirode. In an outburst he says, 'you destroy - you destroy yourselves and you destroy that part of others that gets so fatally involved in you. There is this - dreadful attractiveness in your dark ways of thinking and feeling through life towards death' (p.175).

Nirode introduces Amla to his painter friend Dharma. She is very much impressed by his chivalrous and prophetic nature. She sits ready for a portrait at his request. She loses interest in her job as she does not have the right sensibility of an
artist. There is an evergrowing dissatisfaction in her. She is different with Dharma at his studio ‘a flowering Amla translucent with joy and overflowing with a sense of love and reward.’ There is also a great change in Dharma and his painting after his acquaintance with Amla. Amla’s modelling for Dharma is not at all an identification and assertion of the self and “it is punctuated by moments of self-alienation which generate in her the feeling of an outcaste, a rebel and an outsider,” observe Prof. Swain and Nayak.

Amla escapes from the cruel reality of life into a magical dream world. Her acceptance to sit as a model for Dharma is symbolic of her desire to find peace in the dream world away from reality. Her way to fight with the sordid realities of life is totally different from that of Nirode and Monisha who try to reject life in one way or another. "Unlike them, she runs from the involvement in real, hard life to an involvement in dream world, in fantasy. She immerses in the world of fantasy, and since Dharma is the symbol of that world for her, she becomes deeply attached to him." as pointed by Kajali Sharma.

When a study is made of Amla’s expectations from her life in Calcutta and her quest for fulfillment, her nature of passion is understood. She comes to Calcutta full of exuberance determined to enjoy the city. This vision soon gives way to despair at finding the commercial world around her shallow and unrewarding. Then she feels isolated amid the hubub of the city. This is her alienation from self and society. The only person who attracts her is Dharma. Even Dharma does not give any thought to his relationship with Amla beyond her portrait. He "tried to attain meaningful life by creating a world of nature and mysterious loneliness around it. He creates a new world of fantasy .......... and wants to get fulfilment through it." says Kajali Sharma.
When Dharma narrates the events leading to estrangement between him and his daughter, Amla gets disillusioned. His daughter’s elopement with her cousin makes Dharma alienated both from the self and society. The revelation of Dharma’s cruelty towards his daughter shatters her image of Dharma. His indifference towards his wife makes Amla realise that he does not hold women in high esteem. So her infatuation for him evaporates. Her emotional attachment gradually wanes when she discovers his identity. When she finds her portrait thrown on the floor against the wall, she feels humiliated and discarded. In desperation she leaves Dharma trying to plunge again into the dull routine of everyday life. As Kajali Sharma says, "The realisation that Dharma is interested in her because of the transparency of her personality, showing clearly her inner self and her dreams, upsets Amla. She perceives that she does not belong to the world to which she has flown from real life she believes that she can not grasp the meaning of life resorting to escapism." Like her brother and sister Amla too has a streak of self-destructiveness. In an attempt to self-torture she tears up the invitation to Dharma’s exhibition and goes to the horse-races with Jit. She fails to find a ‘divine solution’ for her problems and remains an outsider in the creative world even. She does not allow her disappointment in love to overpower her and destroy her. She is a creature of instinct. She alienates herself temporarily and she can adjust with the changes in her situation. She does not allow herself to be totally swept away by her feelings. Amla looks outwards in order to make friends. She always needs touch, contact and living people around her, not mere shadows.

Amla believes in looking at life in its face. She is entirely different from her brother and sister and other ordinary women of the society. She is more than her mother in her nocturnal activities. She is confident, cautious and sure in her daily life. Dharma’s
bird imagery used for her aptly suggests that she is a different woman probably ‘an emerging new woman’ of the present society.

Part IV of the novel presents the mother of Nirode, Monisha and Amla. The mother is a more complex figure. She is beautiful, rich and settled in an elegant home in Darjeeling. She is seriously self-absorbed and supremely self-centred. She confesses in her letter to Amla. “It is my fault....for not having kept on Calcutta house, and kept you all with me, for having sold it and come to live alone in this ‘secluded paradise’ which seems to have ‘no channel of communication’ with your very real and rough lives in the city away from me’ (pp.201-202). Out of her later realisation that too, in the permanent absence of her children, she feels alienated. None of her children turns to her even in time of her need, none of them can associate with her. Nirode tries to break out her hold over him. When she proposes to open a bank account, he refuses to accept it. He tells his sister Amla; ‘Tell her to go show it up that old Major of hers, all her stinking cheques. Tell her I want no share of it, no share of banks or finance or insurance and all the rest of her bleeding equipment. I am done with signing my name, believing my name and having a name. Tell her that. I am nameless...’ (p.139). We see her total rejection of her surviving children. Monisha never asks her for help and marches alone to meet her fate. Amla rushes to her to be consoled. Nirode is also pushed away so that she might stand alone to be free.

The effect of temperamental incompatibility of the parents, is much on Nirode, Monisha and Amla. Their parents did not have marital harmony. They woefully lack involvement. Their personal prejudices - ‘terrible contempt and resentment’ in mother’s eyes ‘the malice and spite’ in father’s smile seep into their young lives. The mother is
hardened into a coldly practical and possessive woman from a sensitive accomplished beautiful young woman. The mother’s plight is particularly disturbing. An attempt to forge a reunion between long alienated mother and her children fails miserably. The estrangement between Nirode and his mother is all the more complete. The elder son Arun and his wife will never come to her. If at all they come, they will come as strangers. The mother herself admits that her paradise has no channel of communication with her children’s very real and rough lives in the city away from her.

We see the mother only after the suicidal death of Monisha. He goes to the airport to receive her. Her dignified walk, her beauty and charm and her dazzling approach change his attitude towards her. Her grace compels him to talk to her. He also feels compelled to embrace her and lock her in a ‘prolonged’ embrace. He wants to revive his relationship. But her distant unapproachable looks, her self-controlled poise and silent rejection of sympathy make her remote almost like a goddess. Nirode then realises that she no longer needs them. She looks like a woman fulfilled by the tragedy of her own daughter’s suicide. Nirode tells Artila: ”She is Kali........the goddess and the demon are one........she has watched the sacrifice and she is satisfied...She should pour blood into our veins when we are born and drain it from us when we die”(PP.125-126). Kajali Sharma points out "The Goddess of Kali symbolises all three facets of Nature, that is creation, preservation and destruction and his mother becomes the symbol of them. The mother is used as the symbol of the city of Calcutta and this implies the Calcutta is the symbol of the Goddess, Kali." The bond of blood relationship is cut off.
She sees them as strangers. Monisha’s death strengthened her detachment with others. She may not feel sorry for the Major’s death even.

The mother loses all interest in her children. She is now totally alienated from her children. The mother-child identity gradually gets disrupted. "She figures both as presence and as absence. The past as mother, the present as the city seem to be a single motivating factor driving the individual down a nihilistic path. The mother draws everyone towards her and ultimately engulfs them." as stated by Swain and Nayak.

The mother in the minds of her children is a living image of the destructive powers of the goddess, Kali. The emergence of mother Kali in Nirode’s psyche is symbolic of his violent and destructive self. K.R. Srinivas Iyengar, comments that "the double identification of Nirode’s mother with Kali and Kali with the death provides the central insight that Calcutta, the city of noises and muffled voices, the city teeming with meaningless riot of life is really, the city of death."

The marital disharmony transforms Nirode’s parents into mental monsters. Their temperamental incompatibility leads them to alienation. They are alienated from each other. Monisha and Jiban are alienated from each other. The marriages settled blindly are bound to fail as Indian male dominated families expect women to adjust. Adverse attitude of family members, hostile social traditions and backgrounds make these maladjustments a great menace. Desai has presented marital disharmony and alienation between the couples as they exist in Indian male-dominated families in this novel.
The theme of maladjustment and alienation repeats the parent-child, brother-sister syndrome taking in the different aspects. Almost all the main characters and supporting characters are the products of the same social ethos and are subjected to the same kind of pressures. It was their misfortune to be brought up and come to Calcutta and lead a miserable alienated life, unmitigated by any sense of human relationship. The novel is a quest for identity - inner as well as outer. Through symbolism Desai has been able to portray the sense of alienation of the characters. They live as Prof. Swain and Nayak say in an "incomplete, fragmentary and indifferentiated reality. Their quest for a unified sensibility and unity of being culminates in their search for identity in jumbling and rumbling millions of the city." The novel portrays the distortion of human values and the consequent dehumanization of man in a mechanical society where an individual remains alienated from the human aspect of his identity. The brothers and sisters remain alienated from one another. But they are basically united by the common protest and rebellion against the city. They feel trapped. In the imprisoned state of their repressive intolerance they voice their resentment against the city of Calcutta. Nirode’s alienation and identity crisis in the city is partly due to his ‘unresolved Oedipal fixation’. Amla’s apathy compels their mother to recognise the degree of their alienation from her. Hence, the mother’s decision to remain aloof from her children.’ Maladjustment with human beings and environment make the characters alienated from the society. They become completely alienated from the main stream of the real world and their own selves. Disharmony in married life always results in the disruption of a family. This is well brought by the Anita Desai in this novel.
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